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World: Governments must keep promises on AIDS

Leadership, the theme of this year's World AIDS Day (1 December), is critical to the struggle to overcome AIDS. Local and national governments and global intergovernmental bodies must take responsibility for implementing effective health strategies, challenging prejudice, and ensuring that people living with HIV are at the centre of the response.

But the response to the pandemic has been mixed at best, with more missed opportunities than leadership. Too many governments leave action to civil society and international agencies. Some states have acted, developing strategies that have reduced HIV prevalence. Other states have undermined effective measures through their support of misunderstandings about the pandemic and its causes. Some governments do so through homophobic rhetoric that promotes violence and discrimination and ultimately deprives people of access to needed services. And even more have delayed the implementation of their programmes because they are failing to prioritise effective responses.

The human rights consequences of HIV and AIDS continue to be a matter of global concern. Stigma and discrimination remain major obstacles to effective prevention and care. Poverty and lack of access to health care also impede the realisation human rights and the capacity of people to protect themselves from the virus. The disempowerment of women, including their lack of economic resources, their exposure to gender-based violence and male control, put them at greater risk of HIV infection.

Injecting drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men all face higher risks of infection where governments and health systems have not implemented programs addressing stigma, encouraging more open discussion and adoption of harm reduction approaches. The failure of governments to speak frankly and openly about drug use and sex, and to ensure that effective prevention methods are made available and known to the public, has represented a signal failure of leadership and contributed to lost time in the fight against HIV.

Access to testing, to anti-retroviral medication and development of vaccines and women-centred methods of prevention such as microbicides, all depend on effective collaboration between governments, pharmaceutical companies and research bodies, and funders. Where leadership and effective advocacy are missing, the vital steps needed implement treatment and bring to market necessary preventive tools are put in jeopardy.

The countries of the world committed themselves at the 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV and AIDS to an effective programme of action to respond to HIV. Six years later, and one year after renewing that undertaking, it remains unrealised.

More than 30 million people in the world living with HIV need action as well as words – they need their human rights respected and fulfilled. On World AIDS Day, Amnesty International calls on states to take action to keep their promise.